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PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHBC RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDE RUEHDF RUEHDIR RUEHIK  
RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHAA #1189/01 2530922

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1517

INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4278

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2090

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1955

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2526

RHMFIU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001189

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN AND NEA/IR, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL IR TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: AN IRANIAN-AMERICAN BAHAI AT HOME  
(AGAIN) IN ASHGABAT

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Emboff's recent conversation with an elderly Iranian-American Bahai religious worker in Ashgabat revealed a refreshing exception to the problems faced by minority religious groups in Turkmenistan, including registered organizations. The fact that this Bahai community elder is able to operate quite freely mentoring Bahai youths, meeting in Ashgabat with other adherents from around the world, and conducting other religious activities is rather impressive. Our contact's relative freedom to conduct religious work in Turkmenistan is positive. She also reports having had no problems whatsoever in renewing her residence permit each year since she arrived in 1991. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Our contact, an 83-year old ethnic Iranian and naturalized U.S. citizen, was born in Ashgabat in 1925. Since she returned in 1991, she has functioned as a community elder and shepherd for the country's small Bahai community. She meets regularly with Bahai youth, who look to her as a religious mentor. In fact, the day after her conversation with emboff, she was hosting a lunch for 15 young members of the community from around the country. She is a point of contact for visiting Bahais from around the world, including from North America and the Middle East. She hosts religious meetings in her home and sometimes shows movies from her large collection of Bahai-themed videos. Our contact volunteers as an English language tutor. She also enjoys listening to the 24-hour Bahai radio station that broadcasts from the U.S. via her satellite dish. She said that she never misses an opportunity to spread the message of Baha'ullah in her interactions with Turkmen she meets, although not in a overt way. For example, she reminds vendors of the importance of honesty, and irate cab drivers to use patience rather than profanity, all basic tenets of her faith, she says. Turkmen authorities allow her to renew her residence permit yearly without problems because Ashgabat was her place of birth.

¶3. (SBU) The Amcit Bahai community leader lived in Ashgabat with her family for 13 years, then settled in the northern Iran city of Mashad when they were forced to leave Turkmenistan in 1938. Back in Iran, she attended high school and later completed nurse's training. Her family, ethnic Persians, are originally from Yazd. Her mother was also born

in and lived much of her life in Turkmenistan. Since 1953, she has made pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Bab in Haifa six times, most recently for the dedication of the Bahai World Center in 2001. At the time of her first visit to Haifa, she met with Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of Baha'ullah (revered as a divine prophet), founder of the Bahai faith. (NOTE: The Bahai faith is one of the few registered religions in Turkmenistan and the world's first Bahai House of Worship was built in Ashgabat in 1908. END NOTE.) Our contact left Iran for Nicosia in the 1950s and worked as a hospital supervisor. She was later joined there by her parents and siblings. In 1964, when the civil war broke out in Cyprus, the family returned to Iran, but left for the U.S. three years later via Lebanon. For the next 25 years, she worked in hospitals in East Africa and the Caribbean, undertook further medical training in the United States, ultimately returning to Ashgabat in retirement seventeen years ago. All of her siblings reside in the United States.

**¶4.** (SBU) COMMENT: Our contact's relative freedom to conduct religious work in Turkmenistan is positive. The Turkmenistan government does not limit her religious activities and have allowed her to remain in the country legally. In addition to its window on the Bahai community, our contact's story mirrors Turkmenistan's early Iranian community, who migrated here around the turn of the century. Many were dispersed during Stalin's enforced relocations and sent to Kazakhstan and Siberia. Others were ordered deported back to Iran. Of the original immigrants who managed to remain in Ashgabat, most have assimilated, and their descendants no longer speak

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Farsi at home. END COMMENT.  
CURRAN